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Barack Obama

Statement on the Situations in Northern Iraq and Ferguson, Missouri



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Good afternoon, everybody. (This sound system's really powerful.) Today, I'd like to update the American people on two issues that I've been monitoring closely these last several days.

First of all, we continue to make progress in carrying out our targeted military operations in Iraq. Last week, I authorized two limited missions: protecting our people and facilities inside of Iraq, and a humanitarian operation to help save thousands of Iraqi civilians stranded on a mountain.¹

A week ago, we assessed that many thousands of Yezidi men, women and children had abandoned their possessions to take refuge on Mount Sinjar in a desperate attempt to avoid slaughter. We also knew that ISIL terrorists were killing and enslaving Yezidi civilians in their custody, and laying siege to the mountain. Without food or water, they faced a terrible choice -- starve on the mountain, or be slaughtered on the ground. That's when America came to help.

Over the last week, the U.S. military conducted humanitarian air drops every night -- delivering more than 114,000 meals and 35,000 gallons of fresh water. We were joined in that effort by the United Kingdom, and other allies pledged support. Our military was able to successfully strike ISIL targets around the mountain, which improved conditions for civilians to evacuate the mountain safely.



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Yesterday, a small team of Americans -- military and civilian -- completed their review of the conditions on the mountain. They found that food and water have been reaching those in need, and that thousands of people have been evacuating safely each and every night. The civilians who remain continue to leave, aided by Kurdish forces and Yezidis who are helping to facilitate the safe passage of their families. So the bottom line is, is that the situation on the mountain has greatly improved and Americans should be very proud of our efforts.

Because of the skill and professionalism of our military -- and the generosity of our people -- we broke the ISIL siege of Mount Sinjar; we helped vulnerable people reach safety; and we helped save many innocent lives. Because of these efforts, we do not expect there to be an additional operation to evacuate people off the mountain, and it's unlikely that we're going to need to continue humanitarian air drops on the mountain. The majority of the military personnel who conducted the assessment will be leaving Iraq in the coming days. And I just want to say that as Commander-in-Chief, I could not be prouder of the men and women of our military who carried out this humanitarian operation almost flawlessly. I'm very grateful to them and I know that those who were trapped on that mountain are extraordinarily grateful as well.

Now, the situation remains dire for Iraqis subjected to ISIL's terror throughout the country, and this includes minorities like Yezidis and Iraqi Christians; it also includes Sunnis, Shia and Kurds. We're going to be working with our international partners to provide humanitarian assistance to those who are suffering in northern Iraq wherever we have capabilities and we can carry out effective missions like the one we carried out on Mount Sinjar without committing combat troops on the ground.

We obviously feel a great urge to provide some humanitarian relief to the situation and I've been very encouraged by the interest of our international partners in helping on these kinds of efforts as well. We will continue air strikes to protect our people and facilities in Iraq. We have increased the delivery of military assistance to Iraqi and Kurdish forces fighting ISIL on the front lines.

And, perhaps most importantly, we are urging Iraqis to come together to turn the tide against ISIL -- above all, by seizing the enormous opportunity of forming a new, inclusive government under the leadership of Prime Minister-designate Abadi. I had a chance to speak to Prime Minister-designate Abadi a few days ago, and he spoke about the need for the kind of inclusive government -- a government that speaks to all the people of Iraq -- that is needed right now. He still has a challenging task in putting a government together, but we are modestly hopeful that the Iraqi government situation is moving in the right direction.

Now, second, I want to address something that's been in the news over the last couple of days and that's the situation in Ferguson, Missouri. I know that many Americans have been deeply disturbed by the images we've seen in the heartland of our country, as police have clashed with people protesting. Today, I'd like us all to take a step back and think about how we're going to be moving forward.



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This morning, I received a thorough update on the situation from Attorney General Eric Holder, who has been following it and been in communication with his team. I've already tasked the Department of Justice and the FBI to independently investigate the death of Michael Brown, along with local officials on the ground.

The Department of Justice is also consulting with local authorities about ways that they can maintain public safety without restricting the right of peaceful protest and while avoiding unnecessary escalation. I made clear to the Attorney General that we should do what is necessary to help determine exactly what happened, and to see that justice is done.

I also just spoke with Governor Jay Nixon of Missouri. I expressed my concern over the violent turn that events have taken on the ground, and underscored that now is the time for all of us to reflect on what's happened, and to find a way to come together going forward. He is going to be traveling to Ferguson. He is a good man and a fine governor, and I'm confident that, working together, he is going to be able to communicate his desire to make sure that justice is done and his desire to make sure that public safety is maintained in an appropriate way.

Of course, it's important to remember how this started. We lost a young man, Michael Brown, in heartbreaking and tragic circumstances. He was 18 years old. His family will never hold Michael in their arms again. And when something like this happens, the local authorities -- including the police -- have a responsibility to be open and transparent about how they are investigating that death, and how they are protecting the people in their communities.

There is never an excuse for violence against police, or for those who would use this tragedy as a cover for vandalism or looting. There's also no excuse for police to use excessive force against peaceful protests, or to throw protestors in jail for lawfully exercising their First Amendment rights. And here, in the United States of America, police should not be bullying or arresting journalists who are just trying to do their jobs and report to the American people on what they see on the ground. Put simply, we all need to hold ourselves to a high standard, particularly those of us in positions of authority.

I know that emotions are raw right now in Ferguson and there are certainly passionate differences about what has happened. There are going to be different accounts of how this tragedy occurred. There are going to be differences in terms of what needs to happen going forward. That's part of our democracy. But let's remember that we're all part of one American family. We are united in common values, and that includes belief in equality under the law; a basic respect for public order and the right to peaceful public protest; a reverence for the dignity of every single man, woman and child among us; and the need for accountability when it comes to our government.



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So now is the time for healing. Now is the time for peace and calm on the streets of Ferguson. Now is the time for an open and transparent process to see that justice is done. And I've asked that the Attorney General and the U.S. Attorney on the scene continue to work with local officials to move that process forward. They will be reporting to me in the coming days about what's being done to make sure that happens.

Thanks very much, everybody.

¹ Reference is to Sinjar or Shengal Mountain, which is, or is part of, a mountainous ridge located near the Yezidi Kurdish city of Sinjar in Nineveh province, Northwestern Iraq.